

1996 ADDRESS BY STEVE GAW SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

It is an honor and a privilege to stand before you on a day when we are scheduled to take up and debate our first bill of the 1996 legislative session. The bill, as you all know, will determine the rate of speed Missourians and visitors may travel on our roads.

The road that brings me to Jefferson City each week is Highway 63. Like many of you have discovered during your trips to the Capitol, the roads we travel to get here reveal much about our district and our state. For me, I have found a powerful sense of community in the towns and cities I pass on my 70-mile drive to the capital city.

Just before I pass from Randolph County into Boone, there is a small Amish settlement near the town of Clark. If you drive along the back roads surrounding Clark, you will see several barns that stand as proud testament along the rural Missouri skyline.

Many of these structures were built in a matter of hours when the citizens of that community got together for what we call a barn-raising. On any given barn-raising day, old men work side by side with young boys, passing on their traditions and knowledge to the next generation of builders.

And before you pass from Boone County into Callaway County, there is a road that takes you to the community of Hartsburg. During the floods of 1993 and 1995, the citizens of Hartsburg and the surrounding area came together to fight back the powerful overflow of the Missouri River. Again, citizens of all ages and races stood side by side, forming an assembly line of sandbaggers in an attempt to protect their community.

As I cross over the Missouri River bridge and go into Cole County, I see the Missouri State Capitol, built of Missouri stone and constructed with Missouri hands - a true monument to the people of this state. In these examples, we see demonstrated proof of the importance of working together. In each situation, no one man or woman was more important than the other - each person played a vital role.

It's no different in the Missouri House of Representatives. At full membership, there are 163 of us that work here and we are all dependent upon one other.

As author Joshua Liebman wrote, even the smallest particles on earth are dependent upon each other. For example, he said carbon atoms form charcoal when related in one way and become diamonds when related in another. A lone atom is a meaningless atom but a related atom is the building stone of nature.

Although science teaches that the natural order of the universe is inclusion, there often seems to be human resistance to this truth. We need to understand that success from interdependence is possible. The power to succeed is gained by empowering each other. All we have to do is open our minds to this truth and move beyond our walls of defensiveness to rebuild the strength that is inherently ours.

We must breathe new life into old thought forms. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from his cell in a Birmingham, Alabama jail: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly affects all indirectly."

Leading on this journey will not just be my job, although I will do everything in my power to facilitate this process. Leadership instead must become a collaborative effort.

In previous sessions, we have demonstrated that leadership. We balance our state's budget every year. We have approved legislation that has made great strides in education, sentencing, juvenile crime, welfare and health care. We have proven that we believe in investing in Missouri's future.

I am confident we can pull together the wisdom of the experienced and the enthusiasm of the young, the conservative and the liberal, the black and the white, the male and female in this body to write a chapter in Missouri's history book that our grandchildren and theirs will never forget.

The power of our shared vision, and our willingness to use our imaginations to create a new future for this body, will thrust us forward as we not only enter a new century, but also a new millennium.

We have an opportunity to restore the voters' confidence in us by our example. We can inspire them as the leaders we had hoped and dreamed of being. We have the unique opportunity to restore their faith in the democratic process, the way our founding fathers had intended it to work. This means we must make some necessary reforms in the way we do business here.

First, we need to immediately address the use of public funds spent on House travel. Within the next ten days, I will appoint members to a new House committee to evaluate all travel requests received by my office. The committee will ensure that our funds are spent wisely and appropriately.

Not only must we be prudent with our expenditures, but we must also be mindful of our conduct. The public has a fundamental right to expect ethical behavior from its elected officials. It also has a right to expect that a legislative body can police its own members.

Today I propose that the House form a separate Ethics Committee whose sole function would be to consider ethics complaints filed against House members. I believe this would be an important step in restoring public confidence in the legislative branch of government.

Beyond considering changes that will make the House more accountable and its membership more included in the process, I will be supporting other efforts to make information about the Missouri House more accessible. All of us benefit from a more informed electorate.

Later in the session, we will attempt a pilot project to broadcast at least one day of House floor action live so that Missouri schools can use the video in the classroom as a teaching tool.

In addition, Missouri cable television companies may include the signal on their public access channels, perhaps paving the way for the state legislature to be added to a menu that already features local city council meetings and the U.S. Congress.

Additionally, tomorrow the House will unveil a new Internet site that will greatly enhance the public's access to information about the House and the legislation we are considering. This public resource will be available to a worldwide audience of students and citizens 24 hours a day. And working with Rep. Larry Thomason, the House will soon be embarking on a "paperless chamber" project to make our work in this chamber more productive and efficient.

I believe we can find common ground on these and several other legislative issues this session. Clearly, nothing that we do here is more important than what we do for our children. Our first legislative priority should be to provide a safe environment for our students to learn and our teachers to teach.

Violence in our schools must simply stop. Through improved security measures and letting disruptive students know that there will be serious consequences for their actions, we can bring a calm to the storm of violence that exists in some of our schools. It is time to tear down the walls of violence and ignorance and unlock the barriers of learning.

But as we unlock those barriers of learning, we cannot afford to throw away a troubled child's opportunity to obtain an education. Any safe schools package this legislature adopts needs to include programs to provide the disruptive student with the opportunity to still receive an education.

It is important to invest in alternative education programs so we do not bear the emotional and financial cost of the failure to educate. Last month, the House Interim Committee to Study Safe Schools and Alternative Education released its recommendations. I urge this body to closely examine the committee's proposals.

Also this year, in keeping with the legislature's commitment to education, I expect the legislature to fully fund the foundation formula for 1997 fiscal year.

Just as a lack of education leads a child down a troubled path, a lack of preventive health care exposes a child unnecessarily to illness. Only one state has a worse immunization rate than Missouri.

The Missouri Department of Health reports that for every dollar we spend toward immunizations, the state can save \$21 in future health care costs. Currently, more than one-third of all Missouri two-year-olds are not protected, leaving them dangerously at risk. Just as we put warm clothing on our children in cold weather, we must take steps to protect them from deadly childhood diseases.

We also need to take steps this session to allow women who deliver babies in hospitals a minimum of 48 hours in that facility's care. Some insurance companies are approving payment for only one day in the hospital even though some dangerous health conditions are not revealed

during the first day of life. I believe a mother should have the right to choose a 24-hour or 48-hour hospital stay and not be forced into, as one critic put it, "drive-through childbirth."

On the other spectrum of life, I support legislation that would provide an extra layer of safety to our nursing home residents. Nursing homes should have the opportunity to run background checks on prospective employees and keep out people who should not be working there.

Several other issues will demand our time this year. I hope we will use our shared vision and common ground to push hard on the issues we agree on.

This does not mean that we should not talk about the things we disagree about. As long as we continue to keep talking and working together, we can achieve success this session.

There's a saying that I believe is an appropriate metaphor for this body. It says an airplane cannot fly without a wing on the right and a wing on the left.

We are interdependent upon each other, and unless this body works together as a whole, we will not be able to soar this session. Our local communities have proven to us the benefits of collaboration and hard work. Let's follow this example and get to work on behalf of the people of Missouri.

Thank you.